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Old mill town on the move





PHOTOS BY DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

High-tech surge, sparkling arena and stadium reinvigorate slumbering city on the Merrimack

Our Cities, Our Towns

MANCHESTER, N. H.

By Tom Long

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

A 10-ton truck dubbed "Superman" belched exhaust and lurched forward, crushing its way onto the roofs of five coupes lined up like roadkill. As the opening chords of "God Bless the USA" swelled through Verizon Wireless Arena, 10,000 motor heads burst into applause.

"Sounds like one heck of a night in Manchester," cried the announcer, who was decked out in a

red shirt and carried a checkered flag.

Welcome to the US Hot Rod Association's Thunder Nationals monster truck rally and one heck of a night indeed in Manchester, the newly hip city that is shedding the "struggling mill town" label it has worn like a ball and chain for decades.

"ManchVegas," or simply "Manch" as local hipsters call the city, has been reinvigorated in part by the arena, the addition of a new minor-league ballpark, and an infusion of young professionals attracted by the high-tech companies housed in

the former mill buildings along the Merrimack River.

Others have called the city of nearly 110,000 people — the largest in northern New England — "the new Portland." The idea was reinforced by a complimentary article published last year in the Maine Sunday Telegram that compared Manchester to the popular seaport to the northeast.

"Manchester is not the new Portland," countered Robin Comstock, president of the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce. "Manchester

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The Manchester Monarchs of the American Hockey League emerge from the mouth of mascot Max at Verizon Wireless Arena. The Currier Museum of Art boasts one of the top small collections in the country. Elm Street, Manchester's main thoroughfare, has a thriving nightlife.

Amoskeag Falls powered e

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is Manchester, an exciting, vibrant community that has made a commitment to being the best Manchester that Manchester can be. The mills were the source of the city's vibrancy 100 years ago, and they're the source of its vibrancy today."

The mile-long mountain of brick mill buildings that line the Merrimack in Manchester have found a wide variety of new uses. Dean Kamen, the inventor of the Segway human transport device, is headquartered in one of the buildings, which boasts a private heliport on the roof. Texas Instruments and other high-tech companies are ensconced in others. The University of New Hampshire's Manchester campus also calls former mill buildings home.

Any tour of the city should start at the Millyard Museum in Mill No. 3 on Commercial Street, where visitors can tread wooden floors rubbed smooth by the boots of thousands of mill workers and wonder at the width of the tunnel that once allowed water from the river to power the looms. Floor-to-ceiling photographs of mill workers provide a backdrop for an eclectic collection of working-class artifacts.

The exhibits illustrate how a 54-foot drop in the Merrimack River at Amoskeag Falls morphed from a fishing ground for Native Americans to the power source for textile mills that were the envy of the world and a lure for immigrants at the turn of the 19th century and later.

Who knew that Manchester was also the birthplace of Velcro, Habitant Pea Soup, and Bendos — those cunning, flexible toy figurines?

After visiting the museum, take the time to walk up the four flights of stairs to another of Kamen's creations — the SEE Science Center. Here you'll find a hands-on experience for children ranging in age from toddlers to teens as they learn about electricity and chemistry, experience what it's like to walk on the moon, and view an ambitious project to construct a replica of Manchester from tens of thousands of LEGO blocks and pieces.



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

The Red Arrow Diner on Lowell Street opened in 1922.

April. The New Hampshire Fisher Cats, an affiliate of the Toronto Blue Jays, play in a 6,500-seat riverfront stadium that opened last year.

The city also has its own ski area: McIntyre's, off Smyth Road. It's more hill than mountain with a 169-foot drop, but the municipally owned slope is a fun and affordable place for youngsters to learn to ski or snowboard.

And then there are the concerts, ice shows, and traveling extravaganzas that draw big crowds to the Verizon arena. The auditorium, which opened in 2001, now hosts about 180 events a year ranging from "Disney on Ice" to David Bowie concerts.

"According to most studies, the opening of a new auditorium downtown doesn't benefit local businesses in the long run, but I think Manchester is different," said Jody Reese, 31, the publisher of *The Hippo*, a weekly alternative newspaper that evolved from a popular website. "It gave a real psychological boost to the people of the city."

It has also invigorated the downtown dining and nightclub

scene. Margaritas Mexican Restaurant and Watering Hole on Elm Street also opened in 2001. "A few years ago a quarter of the buildings downtown were abandoned," said Reese. "Now you walk downtown at night and the streets are filled at 9 o'clock."

But some downtown treasures have been around through many of Manchester's ups and downs. The funky Red Arrow Diner on Lowell Street has been open 24 hours a day, seven days a week serving hot coffee and meatloaf dinners since 1922. This is a real diner, with smiling neon coffee cups on the wall and true blue plate specials (prime rib \$10.99, corned beef dinner \$6.99). It is frequented by everyone from truck drivers to patrons leaving the nearby Palace Theatre. Local hero Adam Sandler has a burger named after him and an autographed photo on the wall, and the TV and film star has been known to drop by.

You might also drop by for a "ploughman's lunch" and a pint of Guinness at The Shaskeen, an Irish pub and restaurant, also on Elm Street. Rub shoulders with

Cape Cod

The life-size Manchester is a friendly, walkable city. The business district is only a block from the mills. Stop into the Manchester Welcome Center on the corner of Elm and Merrimack streets and pick up a city map and brochures for local attractions like the Amoskeag Fishways, the Palace Theater, and The Manchester Institute of Art. The volunteers who keep the place going are more than happy to answer your questions and chat as long as you'd like about things to do in their city.

And while you're at it, take a stroll down Elm and check out Lee's Spot, a cramped used book store squeezed between a copy shop and a sandwich joint. It offers a curmudgeonly manager, a great collection of cut-rate literature, and a devoted clientele.

On the east side of town is Manchester's artistic ace-in-the-hole, the Currier Museum of Art, an Italian palazzo-inspired building that's almost as impressive as the permanent collection housed within.

In many ways, the Currier is the artistic heart of Manchester and the cultural antithesis to the mills downtown. In addition to its reputation as having one of the finest small collections in the country, including works by Picasso, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Andrew Wyeth, the museum also hosts many arts events and special exhibits, including the upcoming "Voces y Visiones: Highlights from El Museo del Barrio's Permanent Collection" in New York that opened Friday and runs through June 26.

The Currier also owns and runs the Zimmerman House, the only residence in New England designed by Frank Lloyd Wright that is open to the public. The small but fascinating Usonian home is nestled in a residential Manchester neighborhood. It demonstrates Wright's dream of affordable, practical, yet beautiful homes for everyone. He designed everything from the gardens out back to the furniture and even the dishes the Zimmermans used for family meals.

But fine art and architecture are not for everyone. The city's renaissance has also been fueled by sports and entertainment. The minor league Manchester Monarchs hockey team plays in Verizon Wireless Arena, as do the Manchester Wolves arena football team, whose season begins in

Early textiles wealth



If you go . . .

How to get there

Manchester is 58 miles north of Boston. Take Interstate 93 or Route 3 north to Route 293 and follow the signs.

Where to stay

Radisson Hotel Manchester

700 Elm St.
603-625-1000, 800-333-3333
www.radisson.com/manchesternh

Ash Street Inn

118 Ash St.
603-668-9908
www.ashstreetinn.com

Where to eat

Red Arrow Diner

61 Lowell St.
603-626-1118
www.redarrowdiner.com

Gauchos Churrascaria

Brazilian Steak House

62 Lowell St.
603-669-9460
www.gauchosbraziliansteakhouse.com

What to do

Manchester Historic Association Millyard Museum

255 Commercial St.
603-622-7531
www.manchesterhistoric.org

Amoskeag Fishways

Amoskeag Dam, off Fletcher Street
603-626-3474
www.amoskeagfishways.org

SEE Science Center

200 Bedford St.
603-669-0400
www.see-sciencecenter.org

the regulars at the bar and check out the steamed mussels, an unusual dish served in a creamy broth, more chowder than the traditional treatment. Make sure you get plenty of bread for dunking.

There are ethnic restaurants of all kinds in Manchester, including Gauchos Churrascaria, a Brazilian steak house on Lowell Street, Café Momo on Hanover, a tiny restaurant specializing in the foods of Nepal; and A Taste of Europe, a tapas bar on Elm Street.

As for nightlife, there's plenty

to choose from downtown, including the popular Black Brimmer on Elm Street, and Milly's Tavern, a brewpub on Commercial.

"The city now has a rich nightclub scene and restaurants that are on a par with Manhattan," said Comstock. "I'd like to say Manchester is the Northeast's best kept secret, but it isn't a secret anymore."

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